

UJ Professor Delves into S H A D O W S



The Kapo (Joel Polis) assaults Joshua (Andrew Reynolds) in the barracks as Joshua's father (Martin Ferrero) looks on in the 1999 AFI (American Film Institute) short film, *Shadows*, directed by Mitch Levine. (Photo by Janice Belson)

By Sara Nazarian
Managing Editor

Mitch Levine, professor of Art, Literature and Political Science at the UJ for approximately seven years, took a leave from teaching for one year to direct the recently released *Shadows*, a student thesis film set in an extermination camp.

Levine, whose credits encompass genres of theatre, opera and dance, has previously directed both film and stage. Among them, Levine directed the two short films, *Colette*, based on the French writer, and *Stale Identity*, a homage to Hitchcock.

Shadows, which is the poignant story of a young boy faced with the evils of the Holocaust, magnifies the emotional, physical and spiritual effects of growing up in the most horrendous conditions.

The film does not attempt to be smooth-

edged and easy to swallow. From the onset of the film, the audience is thrown into the dark world of a youth who has come to know loss and suffering too well. The boy's moral struggle leads him to be recruited by his captors and made to turn against his own. It is only in the final moments of the film that the boy learns the implications of the "kill or be killed" mentality and manages to transcend the terms of the moral conflict that the Nazis have imposed.

Once Levine read the screenplay to *Shadows*, written by Arthur Lorenz, he felt a need to participate in bringing its story to the screen.

"We felt as film makers that this was a story that needed to be told: the story of the relationships of the victims of the Holocaust to each other and to the Kapos," Levine said.

Levine notes that many people are not familiar with the role which the Kapos played in the Holocaust.

"Most individuals are unaware that certain Jewish and other victims of the Holocaust were co-opted by their captors into being agents of their own communities' destruction," Levine said. "These were the Kapos. They were prisoners, but many were criminals before the war, and the SS chose them to act as instruments of their authority within the prisoner population."

As the director, Levine had the difficult task of depicting both the cruelty and tenderness in humans, as these qualities were acutely heightened by the circumstances of the Holocaust.

Victor Frankl addresses many of the issues raised by the film in his book *Man's Search For Meaning*.

Frankl chronicles his life as a prisoner in Auschwitz and comes to terms with the psychological motives behind the moral dilemmas which the Holocaust perpetuated.

"Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Shema Yisrael on his lips," Frankl states in his book.

Levine agrees with Frankl, who writes on many of the same issues raised by the film.

"Within each of us lies the capacity for tremendous acts of evil, and simultaneously, we have the compelling need for kind

ness and humanity. I think that even when we commit acts of evil, we still think it is within our power to ask for absolution and redemption. Ultimately, *Shadows* is a film about the darkness in the human soul, but also about the redemptive capacity of the human soul," Levine said.

Levine is very grateful for numerous contributions to the film. *Shadows* received a very positive response from the Hollywood community and was the recipient of one of the most generous student film grants offered by Eastman Kodak this year. Cameras, lighting, and software for the incredible visual effects of the film were all donated.

Levine credits the tremendous generosity of the film's supporters to the script and the fact that *Shadows* was a story that not only should be told, but that was worthy of telling.

Aside from the superior visual effects of the film, *Shadows* also features beautiful and chilling music performed by a Bulgarian classical composer Penka Kouneva.

Kouneva uses the *duduk*, an Armenian wind instrument and a chanting of traditional Hebrew liturgy to create great emotional currents within the viewer. According to Levine, the music of the film serves even a greater purpose than that of being pleasing to the ear.

"The music in *Shadows* became a character in the film, a spirit presence representing the women who had been separated from their families and exterminated," Levine said.

As for the question of where *Shadows* may be viewed, Levine responds that the screening of the film at the UJ is currently in discussion. Levine feels very strongly about using *Shadows* as an educational tool.

"We believe that the film can add to our community's conversation about the power of individual choice, morality and the complexity and meaning of survival in an indescribably horrific moment of human history," said Levine.

Dialogue

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Duke music alumna scores Holocaust film

by Susan Ashley Wilson

"*Shadows*," a recently released short film about life in a Holocaust concentration camp, features a musical arrangement by Duke alumna Penka Kouneva, the first person to earn a Ph.D. in composition from the university's music department.

The film imparts the story of a father and a son held captive in a World War II camp. Intrigued and seduced by Nazi collaborators known as kapos, who were often Jewish themselves, the son becomes an assistant to one such person. "Shadows" is a tale of what happens when one chooses evil and turns against one's own.

The film premiered last week at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, and this month it will be featured at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. "Shadows" has been drawing increased attention. It recently won the American Society of Cinematographers' Gregg Toland Award for Outstanding Achievement in Cinematography.

The film was directed by Mitchell Levine, who designed the world premiere of Peter Gabriel's *Passion* and directed the world tour of Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach*. Levine gave a radio interview recently during which he was asked about the "haunting and beautiful music" of "Shadows."

"Imagining the music for 'Shadows' began with a consideration of how music could even exist in the camps," Levine said. "Composer Penka Kouneva created a sound world based on the *duduk*, a traditional Armenian oboe-like instrument, along with solo Indian voice and cello. The *duduk* is one of the most expressive instruments on Earth and gives voice to the human soul in a compelling and distinct way."

The *duduk* can be heard on soundtracks as diverse



Penka Kouneva has balanced work in Hollywood with concert music. Photo: Les Todd

as "The Last Temptation of Christ" and "Dead Man Walking."

According to Levine, the music in "Shadows" became, in effect, a character in the film, embodying the spirit of the women who had been separated from their families and killed. For the vocal music, they decided to use texts derived from Hebrew poems and liturgy that expresses longing for love, family and

salvation.

Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, Kouneva received her early education and a master's in music theory from the Sofia Conservatory, and later a diploma in music for film, theater and television from the Academy of Performing Arts.

In the 1990s, she came to Durham and studied composition with professor Stephen Jaffe and theory and orchestration with professor Scott Lindroth, both of Duke's music department. A recipient of the Mary Duke Biddle Fellowship for Composition, Kouneva received her A.M. in 1991 and her Ph.D. in composition in 1997.

In January 1999, Kouneva met Duke alumnus and Academy Award nominee film composer and award-winning television composer Patrick Williams while both were participating on a Duke film and video program conference titled, "Sound is Overlooked."

A short time later Kouneva moved to Los Angeles and renewed her contact with Williams. She now freelances as a studio synthesist and assistant with him. In all, they have collaborated on eight television movie projects and a mini-series.

In addition to her work in Hollywood, Kouneva has had a career as an acclaimed composer of concert music with over 20 commissions and four compact disks.